

CHAPTER 4 - A SURVEY OF SOUTH DAKOTA SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

Summary of Selected Survey Responses

NCLB, like the prior federal education law, requires public reporting on student's academic achievement and schools that were underperforming to identify ways to raise student achievement. Our survey indicated that:

- ? 98 percent of superintendents favor measuring the academic performance of their students.
- ? 86 percent of superintendents favor publicly reporting on academic performance of their students, in aggregate.
- ? 92 percent of superintendents favor developing plans to improve the performance of student subgroups that are under-achieving.

These results mirror the responses received from school officials in the Minnesota survey where the percentages were 99, 85 and 94 respectively. Strong support exists for measuring academic achievement, publicly reporting academic performance and developing plans to improve performance.

Some comments made by SD superintendents in favor of the NCLB's aspects of measuring and reporting performance, accountability, and developing plans to improve schools, were:

NCLB has allowed us to focus on individual students and their abilities. It has also made us make conscious effort to align our curriculum with state standards.

NCLB is generally in the best interest of everyone involved in the education process. Accountability is very important and all educators need to realize that we all can improve.

It is good that parents, teachers, administrators, students and the public is [are] focused on improving education.

I agree with the concept of NCLB. I agree with the goal of 100% Adv.[Advanced] & proficient. This is unrealistic but a good goal.

While many superintendents thought NCLB was an admirable goal, many have significant concerns about various aspects of NCLB.

The following table shows that the school officials have significant concerns about applying uniform standards of academic proficiency to all subgroups of students. The survey results show that 64% and 74% of the superintendents agree that all racial/ethnic subgroups and economically disadvantaged students (those eligible for free and reduced-price lunches) respectively should be held to the same standards as other students. However, only 1% of superintendents agreed that special education students, and only 20% of superintendents agreed that limited-English students should be held to the same standards as other students.

Table 5.1: Superintendents' Perceptions About Using Uniform Standards to Measure Students' Academic Proficiency

Survey question: It is appropriate for schools and school districts to hold _____ to the state's uniform standard of academic proficiency.	Percentage Who Responded:				
	Agree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	No Response	Total
All racial/ethnic student subgroups	64%	22%	12%	2%	100%
Free and reduced-price lunch students	74%	15%	10%	1%	100%
Special education students	1%	94%	4%	1%	100%
Limited-English students	20%	66%	10%	4%	100%

SOURCE: Department of Legislative Audit survey of school district superintendents, July, 2004 (N=137).

Comparable responses were obtained to these questions in the Minnesota survey, however; a much higher percentage of SD superintendents (94% versus 79%) disagreed that it was appropriate to hold special education to the state's uniform standard of academic proficiency.

Our survey provided superintendents the opportunity to express their views and comments - both positive and negative - about any aspects of NCLB. The most frequent comment or concern related to special education students and unrealistic goals. Following are examples of the comments received concerning special education (SPED) students:

Students are on IEP's [Individual Education Plan] because they have identifiable problems in the learning process. NCLB & IDEA [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act] are complete opposites. How can you identify a student to work on an Individual Education Plan because he has learning problems and then say that he needs to be at the same level as other students when the school is trying to make his own goals from the IEP.

My concerns with NCLB are with the SPED subgroups. I do not believe it is possible to bring a 15 year old that has a 4th grade reading level to pass the 11th grade reading comprehension test.

I do not think that NCLB "proficiency" standards are realistic for our special education students. By definition students in spec. ed are "not proficient in one or more areas because of a disability". Is it realistic to suddenly expect every student to gain proficiency at the same level as "age level peers"? Of course our goal is always for these students to achieve at the highest level possible but if they fall short of a set of standards that has nothing to do with their individualized plan I do not feel that the school has failed. Special education needs to meet the individual needs of the students involved and our time & effort is best spent working toward each student's individual goals.

My biggest concern is testing special education students at grade level. This is in direct conflict with IDEA. Throughout the school year we do not test special education students at grade level nor is their work at grade level. Yet to determine progress we test at grade level. We will never get to the goal set by this act.

I have no problem with the concept of accountability as mandated by NCLB. Making decisions that are based on student data to improve instruction and increase student achievement is how we've conducted business long before the implementation of NCLB. However, the punitive nature of the legislation over issues that are outside the control of a district is a major concern to me. Our district will never make AYP because of the transient student population, excessively high number of special education students that attend our school, and high absenteeism. We have an extensive special education program that provides services many of our area schools cannot ---therefore, resulting in a high number of students with special needs attending our schools. We also have a high number of students who transfer in and out of our district for a variety of reasons for varying lengths of time. We have students who regularly miss 40+ days of school per year, even though we provide door-to-door busing, parent awareness training, student attendance incentive, etc.

I'm waiting for a lawsuit when I publicly announce my SPED subgroups did not make AYP which in turn puts the school on alert.

Although NCLB requires all students to be proficient by 2013-2014, only 13% of the superintendents said that it was "likely" or "very likely" that their district would achieve that goal. When you look at another question in the survey that is also related to this issue, only 28% of the superintendents thought that it was appropriate to even have this requirement of all children being proficient by 2013-2014 as a national policy. Comparable results were reported in Minnesota's responses. Example of comments from individual SD superintendents included:

It is fine to set goals but please set goals that are realistic. It is impossible to have ALL children attain these goals.

It is unrealistic to believe that a "1 size fits all" federal law will work in urban and rural areas. It is unrealistic to believe that all sub-groups will score proficient by 2013-14. If special ed students score at their achievement level and not at their grade level it may work. Otherwise the scores will never be there.

I'm concerned that "every" child will be advanced/proficient by 2014. Some students are not capable of being in that category- through no fault of their own. Dysfunctional families will complicate matters only more what they are.

I would encourage realistic goals along with procedures to reach them other than imposing penalties for failure to meet goals.

The survey also revealed that a large majority of superintendents did not think that schools should face NCLB-mandated consequences for continued/persistent failure to make "adequate yearly progress" (AYP). Under NCLB, schools who fail to make AYP for two consecutive years must offer parents of students in those schools the option to transfer to another school that has not failed to make AYP for two years (unless there are no such schools within the district). According to SDDOE officials, only two districts have had between 3-4 students each request transfer to other schools. In SD, many of the school districts only have one elementary, one middle and one high school within the district. Out of the 165 school districts assessed for AYP, 135 school districts have no transfer options available to parents of students in schools that failed to make AYP. As a result, this requirement will have little impact for the majority of SD school districts. If a school continues to fail to make AYP in subsequent years, the school

district must offer supplemental education services or consider “corrective actions”. See the previous Table 2.3 which provides the time line of various sanctions/requirements schools face when AYP is not met.

As seen in the following table, a majority of superintendents oppose NCLB prescribed consequences for not meeting AYP. Even though most superintendents (64%), believe that all racial/ethnic subgroups should be measured against uniform proficiency standards, 76% of the superintendents said that schools should not face NCLB mandated consequences for persistent failure by at least one racial or ethnic group to make AYP. The percentage of superintendents who believe that schools should not face NCLB consequences for persistent failure to meet AYP for special education and limited – English proficiency students is even greater, 93% and 82% respectively.

Table 5.2: Superintendents’ Perceptions About NCLB-Prescribed Consequences for Schools Failing to Make Adequate Yearly Progress

Survey question: Schools should face consequences such as mandatory school choice, supplemental services, corrective actions, or restructuring if there is persistent failure to make AYP (as presently defined) by:	Percentage Who Responded:				Total
	Agree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	No Response	
At least one racial/ethnic student subgroup	11%	76%	11%	2%	100%
Free and reduced-price lunch students	24%	63%	11%	2%	100%
Special education students	2%	93%	4%	1%	100%
Limited-English students	6%	82%	10%	2%	100%

SOURCE: Department of Legislative Audit survey of school district superintendents, July 2004 (N=137).

Minnesota survey results were remarkably similar.

Another area of concern addressed by superintendents in the comments section of the survey dealt with the perception that NCLB was an unfunded/under funded mandate. Less than 7% of SD’s superintendents and less than 3 percent of Minnesota’s school officials said that it was “likely” or “very likely” that the school district would receive new federal revenue under NCLB sufficient to cover the costs of any new spending that the Act required the district/school to undertake. The following are some example comments made by the SD superintendents:

Also, I believe it [NCLB] is one more unfunded mandate, and while it may receive some additional funding, it is definitely under funded.

Our federal funds keep decreasing each year & the feds want more from the schools. That is becoming impossible. If the feds cannot fully fund their mandates, they should not be able to enact the laws. Congress should be held to the same accountability as the groups they want to govern. Bottom line: Pay up or stay out of education! There has not been adequate dollars from the feds to make any changes. As enrollment declines, dollars available decline but expenses do not decline accordingly. If we need to make NCLB changes but have less dollars, how are we to make the changes?

I fear that the program will be woefully under funded as is typical with Federal Government Initiatives.

With regard to annual student assessments, the survey found that approximately 72% of the SD superintendents agreed that it was necessary to test students annually in order to have an effective accountability system which was a higher percentage than found in the Minnesota survey (49%). The majority of the superintendents (57%) also agreed that the Dakota STEP assessment provides a sound basis for evaluating academic performance of schools and school districts and that it helped teachers understand the specific academic needs of individual students. NCLB requires that states' assessments be adequate for purposes of both (1) accountability (measuring aggregate student achievement against state standards) and (2) diagnosing the needs of individual students. A lower percentage of Minnesota school officials (36%) agreed that their state assessments provided a sound basis for evaluating academic performance.

Table 5.3: Superintendents' Perceptions About NCLB-Prescribed Assessments

Survey questions:	Percentage Who Responded:			
The State's assessment, Dakota Step (State Test of Educational Progress)	Agree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Total
Annual reading and math assessments, which are required by NCLB for grades 3-8, are a necessary component of an effective accountability system.	72%	14%	14%	100%
Provides a sound basis for evaluating the academic performance of school districts and schools.	57%	15%	28%	100%
Helps teachers understand the specific academic needs of individual students.	69%	12%	19%	100%
SOURCE: Department of Legislative Audit survey of school district superintendents, July, 2004 (N=137).				

The survey also included a question seeking the superintendents' view on the educational benefits of NCLB on the school districts. Superintendents were asked if they agreed that the educational benefits resulting from implementation of the NCLB Act would on balance, outweigh any adverse impacts that the act would have on the school district. Only 20% of the SD superintendents and 7% of Minnesota school officials agreed that the benefits outweighed the adverse impacts of the Act. Comments from the SD superintendents included:

Education goes beyond test results. This Act has reduced education to rote memorization and will eliminate the process of teaching kids to "learn".

We actually lost our Guidance Counselor to the title of "Test Coordinator" for the absolute ridiculous amount of testing we are subjecting our students to at a time when we really now have to only concentrate on the basic and below basic students! We are actually leaving many behind by blindly swallowing the NCLB guides from the fed! A joke!

It's difficult for me to believe that small schools were taken into consideration when the outlines of NCLB were developed.

Schools and Districts should not be judged solely on the Dakota STEP results. Test results should only be one factor in accountability and how well a school/district is performing. Testing every year may become tedious for students who then may not put full effort on the tests. There are always some students who don't try which doesn't give an accurate portrayal of what he/she knows. This seems to be an issue if test results are holding teachers/schools accountable but not individual students and parents.

The superintendents were asked to identify the category of NCLB activities that would likely impose the greatest costs on their school districts. The superintendents' most common response was implementing sanctions and additional services for low performing schools. Because NCLB sanctions are just going into effect, the fiscal impact of these consequences has been pretty limited so far, but superintendents expect a larger impact in the years to come. The following table reports all the responses to this question.

Table 5.4: Superintendent's Opinions Regarding Which NCLB Requirements Will be the Most Costly

NCLB Requirement	Percentage of Superintendents who Identified this Requirement as the Most Costly
Implementing sanctions and additional services for low-performing schools	59%
Implementing additional grade-level tests	10%
Complying with new requirements for paraprofessional qualifications	4%
Complying with new requirements for teacher qualifications	14%
Did not respond to question	13%
NOTE: The survey question asked, "In your judgment, which one of the following requirements of the NCLB Act will be the most costly for your district to implement?" (N= 137)	
SOURCE: Department of Legislative Audit survey of school district superintendents, July, 2004 (N=137).	

The superintendents were then asked how they paid for activities already taken to fulfill the new requirements and then they were asked how they were going to pay for the activities that the school district would have to take during the next two years to fulfill the new requirements of NCLB. The following table recaps their responses.

Table 5.5: Ways That School Districts Paid for Implementing the New Requirements of the NCLB Act

Funding Method	Percentage of Superintendents Who Identified This As Their Primary Funding Method:	
	How Activities were Paid for Already	In the Next Two Years
Spending reductions or reallocations	23%	47%
Allowable reallocations from other federal programs	36%	N/A
Increases in district's federal revenues	11%	12%
Increases in district's state revenues	2%	1%
Increases in district's local revenues	7%	10%
Other	11%	8%
Don't know/didn't respond	10%	22%
Total	100%	100%

SOURCE: Department of Legislative Audit survey of school district superintendents, July, 2004 (N=137).

Minnesota's results were more heavily weighted to having spending reductions or reallocations pay for the costs of implementing the requirements of NCLB.

In our statewide survey of SD superintendents on what changes their districts made (or expect to make) as a direct result of NCLB, over 86% of the superintendents indicated that NCLB had caused them to revise their classroom curricula. The responses also indicated that a majority of the superintendents said that NCLB caused them to reassign or revise jobs of existing administrative and instructional staff. Both these responses are comparable to the responses obtained in Minnesota. Smaller percentages of superintendents said they increased compensation levels in response to NCLB but the percentage was higher (30% versus 17%) than what was indicated by the Minnesota responses. See the following table for actual SD response percentages.

Table 5.6: Changes that School Districts Made (or Will Likely Make) As a Direct Result of NCLB

District Action	Percentage of Superintendents Who Said That Their District:	
	Made This Change In the Past Two Years As a Direct Result of NCLB	Will Likely Make This Change in the Next Two Years As a Direct Result of NCLB
Revised classroom curricula	86%	87%
Reassigned (or redefined the jobs of) existing instructional staff	64%	62%
Reassigned (or redefined the jobs of) existing administrative staff	55%	42%
Discontinued some standardized assessments not required by NCLB	43%	33%

Increased average compensation levels to retain/attract NCLB-qualified paraprofessionals	30%	19%
Hired additional instructional staff	37%	17%
Increased average compensation levels to retain/attract "highly qualified" teachers	27%	23%
Hired additional administrative staff	12%	5%
SOURCE: Department of Legislative Audit survey of school district superintendents, July, 2004 (N=137).		

When superintendents were asked if the SDDOE provided districts with sufficient guidance and information in implementing NCLB, 72% agreed that the department did in fact provide adequate guidance and information. Several superintendents provided additional comments concerning this subject area. The following are some examples:

Our state department of education ... have done an excellent job of approaching NCLB in a "helping" manner to SD schools.

The SD DOE is doing as much as they can to try to assist the schools with limited resources that will never be enough to fulfill the requirements of NCLB.

I appreciate the DOE's efforts to make compliance with NCLB more practical and reasonable.

Our state department of education is doing a great job of helping us meet the goals of NCLB.

A complete detailed listing of all written responses received from SD superintendents can be found in Appendix J.